

How Impressionism Was Rescued: A Marketing and Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

This paper briefly reviews the early history of Impressionism as an art form and its initial rejection in its original European market followed by acceptance in the United States and its subsequent success in its original market. The marketing conditions and factors that influenced the fate of Impressionism as an art movement are considered and focus on role played by the art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel as both marketing facilitator and intermediary, and the impact of the cultural differences between France and America. A short history of the social and cultural conditions in Europe, and France in particular, prevalent when Impressionists artists were first introducing their works. The Marshall-Forrest (2011) model of factors that influence the valuation of fine art and the experiences of Edward Deming who introduced new approaches to management following World War II (Deming 1982), and Ansoff's strategic growth paradigm (1957) are each drawn on to obtain lessons from initial market failures and opportunities for generating marketing success.

Introduction

Given today's quasi universal celebration of Impressionist artists, it is hard to imagine that in their time they struggled tremendously to have their art accepted and appreciated, and almost faded into oblivion. The purpose of this paper is to review marketing conditions and factors that influenced the fate of Impressionism as an art movement, with a particular focus on two factors: The central role played by the art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, and the impact of the cultural differences between France and America. We begin with a short history of the social and cultural conditions prevalent when Impressionists artists were first introducing their works. We then draw on the Marshall-Forrest (2011) model of factors that influence the valuation of fine art, the experiences of Edward Deming when introducing new approaches to management following World War II (Deming 1982) Wikipedia 2019), and Ansoff's strategic growth paradigm (1957) to obtain lessons from initial market failures and opportunities for generating marketing success.

A Short History of Impressionism

The Birth of Impressionism. Impressionism as an art movement first appeared in the early 1860s in Paris, France. Artists such as Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Alfred Sisley, and Camille Pissarro, among others, were at the core of the movement and developed a new style of painting. This new style was characterized by loose brush strokes, the juxtaposition of colors, less precise lines, the depiction of scenes of everyday life, and painting in the outdoors (en plein air). These characteristics were in sharp contrast to the accepted standards of the time, embodied in the Academy of Fine Arts (Academie des Beaux-Arts) in Paris.

Rejection. Not surprisingly, Impressionist paintings were rejected by the official Salon of the Academie, thereby depriving artists of a channel outlet for display and promotion of their works. For that reason, then French Emperor Napoleon III created in 1863 the Salon of Rejections (Salon des Refuses) where rejected works could be displayed. However, the works shown there were met with virulent criticisms by art critics. For example, Monet's Mouth of the Seine at Honfleur (1865) elicited the following comments from art critic Victor Fournel: "What is there to say, for instance, about this Mouth of the Seine at Honfleur? The waves are represented by lumps of earth, the sails of the boats by triangles of black wood: one might well think it had been scrawled by a child of twelve on the cover of his Sunday school book" (Katz and Dars, 1999). Those were desperate times. By 1868, Monet was so broke that he attempted suicide, while his fellow painters were also poverty stricken and disillusioned.

The Role of Paul Durand-Ruel. Paul Durand-Ruel was a Parisian art dealer who had supported and promoted the Barbizon School of painting (a precursor of the Impressionists) as well as Delacroix. In early 1871, Durand-Ruel met Monet and Pissarro in London. All three men had fled the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871) and taken refuge in London. Durand-Ruel immediately recognized the potential of Impressionist paintings and developed an unshakeable conviction in their eventual success (Stamberg, 2015). Therefore, he purchased large quantities of Impressionists' works and for the next fifteen years embarked on a sustained program of financial, marketing, and moral support for them. He provided them with monthly stipends, and often paid their bills, seeking to free them of financial worries, so that they could concentrate on their artistic output. He also organized several exhibitions of their works, starting in 1874. In addition, he steadily encouraged them to continue their work, despite setbacks. Thus, a sale at auction, organized by Renoir in 1874, was a failure. The art critic Albert Wolff, who had been asked to promote the sale, replied that "the impression the Impressionists achieve is that of a cat walking on a piano keyboard or a monkey who might have got hold of a box of paints" (Katz and Dars, 1999). Despite Durand-Ruel's efforts, the outlook for Impressionist artists remained bleak. By 1886, Durand-Ruel himself was on the brink of bankruptcy, having spent his money supporting and promoting his artists' works with few results.

Exhibitions in New-York and Beyond. Fortunately for Durand-Ruel and his artists, in 1886 James Sutton, President of the American Art Association, invited him to organize an exhibition

in New-York. Durand-Ruel selected 300 paintings and took them to New-York. He stayed three months in the U.S., traveling to Washington, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, visiting collectors. In the end, he sold 49 paintings for \$ 40,000, a large sum of money at the time. Durand-Ruel concluded that the American public was much more receptive to Impressionism than European crowds, leading him to open his own gallery in New-York the following year (Stamberg, 2015). This gallery was managed by his sons, who did much to further establish Impressionism in America. Once the American public started to buy Impressionist works, the French public did the same. In that sense, it can be said that Impressionism was “saved” by America. This begs the question of why was the American public so much more open minded to this new painting style than the French and other European publics?

In retrospect, there the American cultural frame of reference was very different from the French (and European) one when it came to painting styles. French minds were formatted by centuries of artistic output centered on historical or religious subjects which followed the rules set by the Academie. These rules made it difficult for the French public to understand and appreciate a painting style that broke many of these rules. In contrast, American minds were not limited by such precedents and, therefore, the American public judged Impressionism not according to a predefined set of rules, but according to the intrinsic beauty emanating from such paintings.

Durand-Ruel himself was well aware of these cultural differences. Late in life, he was quoted as saying: “The American public does not laugh. It buys” (Mendelsohn and Dailey, 2009), and “Without America, I would have been lost, ruined, after having bought so many Monets and Renoirs. The two exhibitions there in 1886 saved me. The American public bought moderately, but thanks to that public, Monet and Renoir were enabled to live and after that the French public followed suit.” (Durrant, 2015). The Impressionists, in turn, were fully cognizant that they and their art genre were saved by Durand-Ruel and readily acknowledged this fact. For example, Renoir is quoted as saying: “Durand-Ruel was a missionary. It was our good fortune that his religion was painting.” (Prodger, 2015).

Factors Influencing the Valuation of Fine Arts

To cast this history of Impressionism in a marketing conceptual framework, we here consider the Marshall-Forrest (2011) model of fine arts valuations, and the Ansoff (1957) conceptual framework for growth through diversification. The Marshall-Forrest model recognizes a variety of factors that influence potential purchasers’ perceptions of prices of art works and, by extension, potential purchasers’ willingness to buy. Factors held to influence perceptions of valuation of an artwork include artist factors, “product factors, marketing facilitator influences, marketing intermediary influences, potential purchaser influences, and external market demand factor. Artist factors described in the model include the artist’s reputation and brand strength as well as celebrity status, recognized technical skills, and base price motivations.

Product factors are described as media, size of the work, and expressive symbols. Intermediary influences include the reputation of the gallery, other artists represented, and the gallery's collector clientele. Potential purchaser influence factors include purchaser identification with symbols, individual purchaser motivations, awareness of the artist as a brand and its associations, and personal economic constraints. External market demand factors include general economic conditions and demand for art in the broad market.

The previously described history of Impressionism in Europe overall and France in particular, clearly demonstrates that for years following the introduction of the first Impressionists exhibits, the genre was constrained by the rigidity of the market controlled by the Academie des Beaux-Arts in Paris and established standards which the Impressionists violated. The result was exclusion from established dealers and public ridicule by art reviewers and critics (Katz and Dars 1999) and salons, thus penalizing Impression from the perspective of the Marshall-Forrest (2011) model in terms of facilitator factors and intermediary factors, and thus also of artist factors and potential purchaser factors. From this perspective, it is understandable that without the embrace of the Academie des Beaux-Arts, given its influence on a rigid cultural orientation regarding art, Impressionism was accepted only by a small segment of the market that was open to artistic innovation. Facing poor reception in a culturally and structurally constrained art market, a new market would be needed for Impressionism to succeed.

The Deming Effect

Conceptually, but in a very different field, the story of W. Edwards Deming and Total Quality Management (Wikipedia 2019) is similar to the market reaction to Impressionism. During World War II, Deming developed Statistical Process Control Techniques to improve the quality of manufactured goods. Following the war, Deming tried to promote his ideas to American companies but, there too, given cultural rigidity and an established industrial elite, his efforts were ignored by American managers who did not understand the necessity to adopt such techniques, given that there was already great demand for American made products overseas.

During 1947, Deming became involved with Japanese industrial society while helping plan the 1951 Japanese census and was invited by the Japanese Union of Scientists and Engineers to present his ideas regarding Total Quality Management (TQM). As a result, he introduced a large number of Japanese engineers and managers to his techniques and ideas, emphasizing that improving quality would reduce expenses while increasing productivity and expanding market share (Wikipedia 2019). Before long Japanese companies faced increased demand in foreign markets, including the United States, for their higher quality products with lower prices. The resulting competition faced by American goods even within the United States caught the attention of American companies, that then followed suit and began to adopt Deming's techniques. Here we see a situation similar to that experienced by Impressionism, of a product

that was rejected in its original market, but accepted in a new market, and with that acceptance was successfully reintroduced to its original market.

The Ansoff Model

In his 1957 Harvard Business Review Article “Strategies for Diversification” Ansoff introduced a two by two paradigm for revenue growth. In the basic form of the model, one axis represents new versus existing products and the second axis represents new versus existing markets. This results on four cells. The cell of existing products – existing markets calls for a market penetration strategy. In a fine art marketing context, this would represent the situation of an artist or art school offering works in an old, or classical accepted style.

The new products-existing markets cell would call for a product development strategy. This may represent the situation of early French impressionists introducing a new style of painting to the existing market, but a style of painting for which the existing market was not prepared to accept due to the existing cultural and structural constraints. While traditional marketing guidance would call for product modifications to better fit the “wants” of the existing market, this is typically not an option for artists who, idealistically, may wish their art to be accepted on their own terms.

The third cell would be for new products – new markets and would call for what Ansoff calls a diversification strategy. This strategy would not fit the producer (artists) requirements for fine arts marketing because it suggests adapting products and marketing techniques to fit the cultural needs of the new markets. While this is a sensible strategy, in product realms that do not carry emotional and value laden content based in the producers’ self-expression, it does not fit the unique producer needs encountered in fine arts marketing under which the artist produces for self-expression and personal satisfaction (Hirschman 1983).

The impressionist experience, and that of Deming, may best fit Ansoff’s fourth cell, existing products-new markets, and would call for a market development strategy to prepare buyers in a new market for acceptance of a new to their market product although an existing but failing product in the original market. In both cases, the “rejected” product has been created without considering the fit with the newly intended market and so may be considered an existing product having been already introduced in the existing market. In this case, the role of the marketer is to prepare and educate the market as to the value characteristics of the “new” product that was previously rejected by the old market. Deming found a receptive and adaptive cultural and structural industrial community in post-war Japan due the post-war defeat of Japan and the destruction of infrastructure. In bring Impressionism to the United States and to the New York art market in particular, Durand-Ruel entered a culturally adaptive market and market structure that was open to new art styles and individual interpretation. Consistent with a market development strategy, this required recruitment of intermediaries,

education of the facilitators, and through the facilitators, the education of the potential art consumers. Most interestingly, for both Deming and for the Impressionists, acceptance in a new market prepared the ground for re-introduction and acceptance in the old, existing market.

Conclusion

It has been argued in this extended abstract that two factors played a key role in rescuing Impressionism from obscurity: The insight and actions of the art dealer Paul Durand-Ruel, and the impact of cultural differences between France and America on the ultimate fate of Impressionism. Even though the history of Impressionism is more complex than suggested here, the fact remains that these two factors were indeed critical in shaping its history. Perhaps most importantly, the marketing history of Impressionism provides an interesting opportunity for further discussion and research. Such discussion and research could illustrate key marketing concepts and explore the challenges and opportunities of marketing products that due to their subjective and hedonistic qualities (Hirshman 1983) are presented to opaque markets. In opaque markets the valuation of products is uncertain and culturally dependent, thus enhancing the roles of the facilitators and intermediaries.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: By reviewing the marketing history of Impressionism from initial rejection to long-term acceptance this paper provides an interesting opportunity for further classroom discussion illustrating key marketing concepts of new product acceptance in rigid versus adaptive markets. It sets the stage for further research to explore the challenges and opportunities of marketing products that due to their subjective and hedonistic qualities are presented to opaque markets in which they have uncertain valuation and are culturally dependent, thus enhancing the roles of the facilitators and intermediaries. For practitioners, this paper provides a background to view the need to consider the roles of facilitators and intermediaries in preparing and educating potential consumers to whom new products, particularly hedonistic products, are directed.

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